

The impact of 30 years of neo-liberal reforms in the public perception of the relationship between democracy and human welfare in Costa Rica

Issues, problems, studied scenarios and involved actors

This research discusses the current perceptions of the notion of democracy and human development in Costa Rica, taking into account the effects generated by the neoliberal economic reforms applied in the past thirty years. This was achieved through an analysis in two dimensions: first the conception and notion of democracy that Costa Ricans manage today, and secondly, if this notion of democracy includes specific demands in terms of human development and general welfare, in other words, what are the democratic principles and contents that the Costa Ricans consulted consider democracy should have for it to be legitimized by the people.

In order to answer the research objectives, we conducted six focus groups with Costa Rican citizens, which were distributed as follows:

- Two focus groups with citizens involved in a political party of national scope. We selected the National Liberation Party (PLN, initials in Spanish)¹ and the Frente Amplio (FA, initials in Spanish)² because at the time of the data collection of this information, they were leading the presidential election polls.
- Two focus groups with citizens involved in Development Associations³ at the municipal level. Specifically, Hatillo Development Association (urban), and La Guaria Development Association (rural).
- And lastly, two focus groups with citizens involved in social movements and without any membership or affiliation with political parties or local institutions. We selected members from the Maleku Indian Community (rural) and the Anarchist Autonomous Collective (urban).

In each group we applied a discussion guide that addressed the issues associated with the transformations undergone by the State and the democratic system since the implementation of neoliberal reforms. For this purpose, the work was articulated through four activities: first, definition of democracy; second, a reflection on the changes that democracy has undergone in recent decades; third, the relationship of the effects that democracy and neoliberal reforms have had on human welfare; and finally, what contents should democracy have – in political, social and economic terms – for it to generate human welfare.

¹ The PLN was founded in 1951. Has exercised the presidency nine times since 1953. Calls itself social democratic. For more information see: <http://www.plncr.org/>

² The FA was founded in 2004. This is a newly created party defined as democratic left. For more information see: <http://www.frenteamplio.org/>

³ Development Associations are institutions that were created in the 3859 Act - Law on community development - with the intention of serving as a bridge between the National Community Development (DINADECO, initials in Spanish) and communities. Through these, communities actively participate in all plans and programs for their own development.

Political analysis

From the work conducted with the six focus groups, various interpretations about the political field emerge, even though it cannot be generalized to the entire population, it is possible to recognize and identify trends in how Costa Ricans articulate the relationship between democracy and human welfare.

First of all, we uncovered that democracy appears strongly linked to political liberalism. In other words, the way the people consulted define democracy is through respect for basic freedoms and political rights. This shows the impact of the association between democracy as a political model that privileges the collective, and political liberalism as a school of thought that privileges the individual; in the displacement of meaning associated to the first. This is clearly stated when the consulted groups placed, as a core value, freedom before equality. Only groups that were located to the left of the political spectrum included participation and equality as core values in democracy, however, this view constituted a the minority.

Secondly, except for the focus group conformed of members of the National Liberation Party, the remaining consulted groups put forth that democracy today is worse than in the past. However, this statement does not necessarily link neoliberal reforms with the decline in the perception of democracy, despite reported deterioration in health services, education, corruption, clientelism, and lack of transparency in the public service. In the case of those belonging to the Development Association, they described the causes of the deterioration of democracy based on moral grounds: loss of values, corruption, licentiousness, excessive rights, among others; while the group from the Indigenous Community Maleku complained about their lack of visibility by the State and being neglected in the development of public policies. Meanwhile, members of the Frente Amplio and the Anarchist Autonomous Collective argued the cause of the democratic deterioration as a result of the reduction of opportunities for participation and interpellation of the State.

This difficulty to define the relation between neoliberal reforms and its impact, not only in the exercise of democracy but in the human development, is related to the how the definition of democracy originates. This demonstrates how the path to define a concept is follows the route to political action, and that groups that opted for a definition of democracy associated with electoral participation and respect for procedures, have greater difficulties associating economic and social content thereto.

Therefore, in third place, the contents attributed to democracy are conditional upon the above. The broader the definition of the model, more content will be demanded from the State. However, only the members of the Anarchist Autonomous Collective raised substantial modifications to the State, while the remaining groups demanded greater presence of public and social policies by the State - education, employment, health, safety, transparency - before a transformation or a reconfiguration of the order political.

Public policy recommendations in the short term

According to what was stated above, in terms of human welfare, the Costa Rican government should solve specific problems in public health care services, education, job creation and transparency in the public service. If one considers that public policies are rational processes to address the needs of society, they also represent a public interest that must be solved by the State. In this sense, if you take into account the demands articulated by the participants of the focus groups, in the short-run the State must engage in greater

communication between communities and understand their needs, with the participation of the institutions responsible for ensuring its compliance.

To achieve this, a mechanism is needed that allows the State to identify the situation more accurately. This can be done through the following steps:

- Summon organized groups of civil society to express their demands in health, infrastructure, education, job creation and transparency in the public service.
- Create committees within the relevant Departments to collect information and establish a work schedule that allows the development of proposals. These should be discussed at any time with organized groups of civil society, in order to design policies that respond to consensus across sectors.
- Establish criteria for the State's compliance with oversight by civil society. This will ensure that popular demands for greater access to quality health services, better education, job creation and reduction in corruption can be supported through mechanisms that enable horizontal accountability.

Now, those consulted said that there are issues that need to be urgently addressed by the State. These are:

- The necessity of incorporating the invisible sectors in the community and national decision-making process.
- The reduction in the time spent on waiting lists for health care within the social security system.
- The generation of greater employment opportunities leading to social mobility.
- The establishment of specific mechanisms of accountability and transparency that can be used by any citizen.
- Introduce mandatory educational content in primary and secondary education that includes the discussion of political and ideological concepts, as well as a debate on the participation and responsibility of the state in the generation of human welfare.

On the other hand, in terms of the democratic exercise, the State must create greater openness for citizen participation. While the above suggestions are organized based on this horizon, the State must make structural changes in order to transform political relations between institutions and citizens.

Recommendations for long-term public policy

In structural terms, the research indicates the presence of social discontent associated with low participation in decision-making and state corruption. Therefore, the recommendations made above need institutional reforms to ensure that communities and social movements are referred to as valid actors who can question, challenge and propose which social, economic and political contents are priority. For this purpose, it is necessary that the State conduct constitutional reforms to ensure this participation and coordination of sectors, so that the diversity of opinions is not longer perceived as threatening, instead of something that allows the construction of better living conditions. Among these, we include the following recommendations as well:

- Reform the regulatory framework to allow Costa Rican citizens nomination and revoking referendums.
- Modify the regulatory framework to make it obligatory to inform the public about who competes for elected office.
- Create mechanisms for the oversight and accountability that include members of civil society.
- Establish as mandatory the provision quality public services, by the State, to ensure human development.

Dr. Laura Álvarez Garro

PhD in Humanities with an emphasis on moral and political philosophy. Master in Social Sciences from the Latin American Social Sciences Institute (FLACSO) in Mexico. Bachelor degree in Psychology from the University of Costa Rica. Professor in the School of Philosophy and Master of Psychoanalytic Theory at the University of Costa Rica (UCR). Researcher at the Latin American Social Sciences Institute (FLACSO) Costa Rica.

Email: lauraalvarezgarro@gmail.com